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BAUDELAIRE: AN INTRODUCTION TO

CONTEMPORARY ART AND AESTHETICS

Charles Baudelaire has often been called the initiator of modern art and aesthetics, that is to say of modern trends both in the various arts, such as painting and poetry, *and* in the conceptions and theories about these. Not only literary historians but also poets themselves are found in the ranks of those who reach back and claim that a new footing was achieved in and through the works of Baudelaire, and that this footing provided a legacy for further developments still in progress today. But this is easier said than understood. It is, moreover, easy enough to remark the striking differences in the literary and artistic world before and after the appearance of Baudelaire's works, but the enumeration of these differences never comes to the question of what it is *in* his works that possessed the tremendous power necessary to reroute the tradition. It is this question that I would now like to consider, namely: Wherein does this definitive power lie?

The considerations of this essay fall into two parts. The first interprets in some detail Baudelaire's prose poem "The *Confiteor* de l'Artiste" with a view to pointing out that the ambivalent experiences invoked and presented in the poem precisely form the region where the fundamental possibilities of art loom up. The second part of the paper will then go on to discuss the question of how Baudelaire *theoretically* conceived the fundamental ground of artistic creation. I would like to suggest that Baudelaire's aesthetic conceptions about the *origin* of the work of art and its status *vis-à-vis* reality are actually, (that is, concretely and poetically), embodied in the ambivalent experiences peculiarly presented by the "*Confiteor*". In this way we will survey Baudelaire both as a poet and as an aesthetician, and discover a certain accord between these two aspects of his works. Agreeing with critics like Jacques Maritain who assert that with Baudelaire "poetry became self-conscious" and that in this critical

remove from its hitherto unquestioned subject matter lies the beginning of the modern probe into the origin of the work of art, I shall discuss Baudelaire's modernity in terms of his three-fold belief that the work of art is a break with reality, that it is moreover a destruction of it, and that art stands self-sufficiently by itself, having, so to speak, a substance of its own apart from any service which it might seem to render outside of itself—being, in a word, an absolute.

The Confiteor of the Artist

How penetrating the ends of autumn days are. Ah! penetrating to the point of pain! For there are certain delicious sensations, the vagueness of which does not exclude their intensity; and there is no jab sharper than that of the Infinite.

A great delight it is to drown one's glance in the immensity of the sky and the sea! Solitude, silence, incomparable chastity of the blue sky! a small quivering sail at the horizon, which by its smallness and isolation imitates my irremediable existence, monotonous melody of the surf, all these things think through me, or I think through them (for in the greatness of *rêverie*, the *self* loses itself rapidly!); I say, they think, but musically and picturesquely, without quibbles, without syllogisms, without deductions.

But then these thoughts, whether they emerge from me or spring from things, soon become too intense. Energy within voluptuousness creates an uneasiness and a positive suffering. My too tensed nerves emit nothing but screaming and painful vibrations.

And now the depth of the sky consternates me; its limpidity exasperates me. The insensitivity of the sea, the immutability of the whole scene revolts me. . . . Ah! is it necessary to suffer eternally, or to flee the beautiful eternally? Nature, pitiless enchantress, rival always victorious, let me go! Refrain from tempting my desires and my pride! The study of the beautiful is a duel where the artist screams in terror before being vanquished.

The "*Confiteor*"¹ begins with a season and a time: "How penetrating the ends of autumn days are!" With a view to the reversal in the last paragraph it is well to ask how it is that these opening lines form the proper setting of the poem. It should be noted that there is a twofold pregnant synthesis here: it is the *ends* of the days, and ends are also beginnings in temporal developments; more important perhaps, it is autumn, the end of summer and the beginning of winter. In each case something is to be born. The paradox of life and death, death and life, is a common theme of poetry and prose alike,

but it is less common that evening and autumn, rather than dawn and spring, are taken to convey the point. In a sense, then, the reversal presented directly in the last paragraph announces itself already in the first—by its mood. Indeed, the whole first paragraph is an elaboration of this mood of being on the verge of a new turning, but a turning which does not hold out the promise of relief—a turning which rather portends some sort of disaster. The mood is first of all one of acute penetration: "Ah! penetrating to the point of pain!" The very word suggests the atmosphere as one in which something forcefully pertinent will be acting upon, moving in upon man—or upon the artist. The tense suspension of this mood is immediately enhanced by the invocation of "the vague". What is vague stands somewhere between transparent lucidity and clouded opacity. In the sense in which Baudelaire means the word, it does not merely stand there, it much rather foreshadows and foretells something—but only ambivalently. Thus the poet says: ". . . the vagueness [of these certain delicious sensations] does not exclude their intensity". The intensity here in question refers back to the sensations, that is to the feeling or mood that senses an imminent or impending "penetration" along with the force, weight, and significance of this. Accordingly, it is this intensely penetrating but nevertheless vague "somewhat" upon which the initial and somehow abiding mood of this prose poem is focused. It is a "somewhat" which somehow transcends, but nonetheless cuts into, the idyllic scene typified by the "ends of the days in autumn". The last line of the first paragraph sums it all up: ". . . there is no jab sharper than that of the Infinite".

While in the first paragraph we have a vaguely defined scene intensely threatened by something, presumably the Infinite, the second paragraph develops in some detail this scene in so far as it seems to be secure from this threat. To begin with, it is no coincidence that while the first ended with the Infinite, the second starts off immediately: "A great delight it is to drown one's glance in the immensity of the sky and the sea!" Here we have the concrete setting or place of the poem—in the midst of the vast infinitude or immensity of inscrutable nature. "The sky and the sea"—these two aspects of primordial nature form the arena in which the initial encounter with reality occurs. In this first phase of man's encounter with gigantic reality all the senses come in and bask in the natural spectacle. "Solitude, silence, incomparable chasteness of the blue sky! a small quivering sail at the horizon, which by its smallness and isolation imitates my irremediable existence, monotonous melody of the surf. . . ." Man becomes immersed in the sense impressions which nature showers on him. He feels cuddled into a resting order. He contemplates

nature and melts into a reality perhaps deeper than the everyday. Everything seems to be dissolved into a unity of appearances. The boundaries between the self and the rest of the world, boundaries so prevalent in the frustrations of ordinary life, become dissipated: ". . . the *self* is soon lost!" However, as man feels at one with nature, something strange has happened to his senses: they have become means, or rather ends, in themselves; contrary to their function of being, as in ordinary experience, means *to* an end, they no longer serve for anything beyond their own immediacy. In the sight of the "azur" and the sound of the surf, one enjoys simply seeing and hearing. The sounds, smells and sights do not indicate anything beyond just this; they are just what they are. Primordial nature becomes a temple of senses, a world of the senses in primordial unity. The usual distinction between a thinking subject and a thought about its object becomes meaningless: ". . . all these things think through me, or I think through them". This unity and lack of clear-cut distinction comes to a head in the last lines of the paragraph, where the immediacy of the sensuous presentation obliterates the traditional dichotomy between thought and things: ". . . they [the things] think, I say, but musically and picturesquely, without quibbles, without syllogisms, without deductions".

The third paragraph of the poem returns to the intensity of the mood, focusing on this as it evolves into a crisis: "But then these thoughts, whether they emerge from me, or spring from things, soon become too intense". The harmonious union of things thinking and things thought, the union between awe-inspiring nature and sensuous man, climaxes in its being *too* intense. As real, as delightful, as powerful as it may be, such harmonious unity between subject and object testifies to its own untenability. The very intensity and energy of these idyllic, pleasurable circumstances eventuates in its own contrary: "Energy within voluptuousness creates an uneasiness and a positive suffering". We shall notice that the poet speaks of the consequent suffering as positive. This qualification is contrary to our most ordinary ways of thinking. Why should the suffering be "positive?" This question may appear to be unanswerable from the context of the paragraph. However, we can see that *if* the suffering were in fact merely negative—contrary to what we read—it would function as an obliteration of man—much in the same way that the union of the previous paragraph eradicated the separate identity of man. For suffering is negative when it completely takes man over in such a way that only fruitless concentration on the pain and consequent self-pity result. Here, however, the qualification of suffering as positive suggests that it is going to function positively in the differentiation of man—or the artist, since he is the

one who can in fact make something out of it—out of the idyllic mass of the initial encounter. As a result of the suffering, the narrator of the poem becomes aware first that nature cannot be simply accepted in its own terms of immediacy—because these terms deny the identity of man—, and furthermore that an activity or response of man is demanded if the encounter is to be grasped in its entire meaningfulness. For it is well-known that Baudelaire was much concerned to transform his “voluptuousness into knowledge”.² The turning point of voluptuousness on the one hand and knowledge on the other is precisely there where the intensity of the pleasure somehow turns it into pain and where the perceiving subject distinguishes itself from his environment just by the fact that his perceptions are peculiarly his and his alone, without finding their objects. Thus the last lines of the third paragraph leave the subject of the prose poem in this painful suspension and separation: “My too tensed nerves emit nothing but screaming and painful vibrations”.

Finally in the fourth and last paragraph of the “*Confiteor*”, the harmonious union portrayed by the second paragraph is completely shattered. However, we have already been warned by the poet not to understand this disruption as negative, but rather to look for something positive. This would appear impossible at first sight: “And now the depth of the sky consternates me; its limpidity exasperates me”. All sense impressions become the reverse of what they were before. The previously mysterious, immense, intense, incomparably chaste sky is now a source of consternation and exasperation. Furthermore, the pleasant melody of the sea has changed into “the insensitivity of the sea”, and the penetration of the initial experience has evolved into a revolting “immutability of the whole scene”. There is, however, at this point a break in the text, as though to suggest the introduction of something hitherto dormant. We read: “Ah! is it necessary to suffer eternally, or to flee the beautiful eternally?” Here we have after the break indicated by the dots the first direct reference to the fundamental element of art: the beautiful. But the text introduces this element not as an actuality already achieved but as a possibility apparently looming up for the first time, now, with the break with nature, with the break with reality as it has been hitherto encountered. The break may indeed appear negative on the face of it, but the passage just cited (“is it necessary to suffer eternally, or to flee the beautiful eternally?”) indicates that this negation is pregnant with the vague possibility hinted at in the first paragraph and now clarified somewhat as the positive possibility of the beautiful, the condition of art itself. To be sure, the alternative is, as the poet conceives it, between suffering and fleeing the beautiful; in either case no

relief is offered—precisely as is suggested by the imagery in the first paragraph—only a *conflict* in which man distinguishes himself from nature and is destined to succumb to the greater powers of the foe, in this case the nature or reality with which the narrator of the prose poem had previously enjoyed such a marvellous union and harmony: “Nature, pitiless enchantress, rival always victorious, let me go! Refrain from tempting my desires and my pride”. Notice the peculiar character of the conflict: Nature is a foe not because she is inherently evil and hateful (as some critics such as Sartre³ and Auerbach⁴ have maintained) but because there is somehow a temptation to become idyllically identified with her, and the consequent lack of self-identity is somehow untenable for the artist engaged in the creation of the work of art. And the beautiful, the defining characteristic of art, also makes no sense except within the conflict with this “most honorable enemy”, a conflict in which the artist is precisely the one who is able to participate and cry out his work before his defeat. Thus we read in the last sentence: “The study of the beautiful is a duel where the artist screams in terror before being vanquished”.

“The *Confiteor* of the Artist” is to be interpreted to convey what the title says. It is a prose poem embodying the “confession” of the artist, that is, the revelation of the creative process given by one who creates. In this we have a supreme example of the “self-consciousness” of poetry: a poem which is not only a poem, but also a reflection upon itself, upon what it is, upon that which makes it what it is. We have been considering it up to now as a “reflection upon itself” and have seen it as reflecting an idyllic situation, haunted perhaps by a penetrating “somewhat”, but characterized initially as a harmony and unity with nature, then as presently a crisis eventuating finally in a break, a break containing both the emission of the artist’s peculiar cry, his work, and his downfall. The poet seems to indicate that the downfall is necessary, thereby implying that the emergence of the work of art, just as the harmonious union with nature, negates and obliterates the artist. But the point of this negation, what is “positive” in the suffering and eventual obliteration, is in no wise the enlightenment or salvation of the artist—more particularly the poet—but rather the work of art itself, the poem. Not the artist but rather the work of art survives. About this sole survivor nothing at all is said in the poem. But this “gap” in the confession should not at all surprise us. After all, the poem, this particular poem in front of us, “The *Confiteor* of the Artist”, is precisely the point of the poem. This it is which blatantly fills the gap. Besides, each concretion of the creative process, as issuing from a breakaway from all that is predetermined and consequently independent of the passionate

movement of the creative process, each new creation goes beyond any set rules or descriptions. Nevertheless, though, a work of art does constitute a unity derived from a certain relationship vis-à-vis reality, and in the light of this derivation so vividly presented by the "*Confiteor*", we can examine the *status* of the work of art as Baudelaire understood it, quite apart from any general *prescription* of its nature.

Paradoxically enough, it seems that we will have to turn to Baudelaire's theoretical writings in order to gain an insight into the poetic concretions of the creative process. For each poem or work of art is its own concretion and cannot speak of another concretion as its source. In any event, though, we can see how possibly it might be argued that Baudelaire's views on art have a theoretical foothold, if not a chronological beginning, in the experiences invoked and presented in the "*Confiteor*". For each paragraph of the prose poem seems right on the face of it to dictate one moment of the emergence of art, and to offer, enigmatically to be sure, the preconditions of art and finally to make a suggestion as to its status. It is now necessary to underline, by appealing to the poet's essays and letters, this suggested conception of art as it signals a break with reality, a destruction of it, and finally an autonomy and self-sufficiency of the work of art independent in some fundamental way of the reality from which it broke away.

The "*Confiteor*" ended with the downfall of the artist preceded by a positive suffering culminating in the lack of union and harmony previously enjoyed with nature. This break with the reality of nature is of course very clearly seen in Baudelaire's much celebrated distaste for the languid and idyllic nature of the Romanticists and equally well seen in his opposition to Realism. It is, however, more interesting to note *why* according to Baudelaire it is that the break is crucial for the artist and the work of art. Roughly speaking, the reason seems evident enough: the artist is not an artist if he merely *accepts* reality as it is; he must *create* something. Accordingly, Baudelaire says of the pure artist that he "sees mystery everywhere".⁵ And he asks "What is a poet (I take this word in its widest meaning), if not a translator, a decipherer?"⁶ Furthermore, when speaking about different kinds of art, he refers to artists as "abstractors of quintessences":⁷ that is to say, the artist must abstract not only the essence from the reality of nature which he faces but also the "quintessence", that fifth essence of the Greeks which, though it contains all the physical elements of the world, is not itself physically or naturally present, but reveals itself only indirectly through the other four essences. What is common to all these passages is the marked unwillingness to conceive of the

artist or poet as one who absorbs nature; what interests the artist and poet is only revealed to him as he stands apart from nature and reality and carefully ferrets out his materials from it. Because he both stands apart and also borrows from nature, however, the artist cannot simply divorce himself from her. Indeed, the last paragraph of the "*Confiteor*" speaks of nature as a "rival—always victorious". And in his theoretical writings we run across a strange passage which speaks, in passing, of beautiful painting as being "nature reflected by an artist".⁸ The double meaning of the verb "to reflect" seems to suggest the problem at hand. First, reflecting means to think over, to digest—and this is precisely what the artist does when he takes a stand at a distance from reality before incorporating it into his creation. But the verb also means to reflect in the sense in which a mirror reflects the image of that which happens to be placed in front of it. This sense of the word would suggest at least that the reality of nature *somehow* abides in art, if only as a reminder to the effect that she is not going to be, and was not originally, accepted at her face value. However, this sense of "reflecting nature" is destined to remain weak even though we are probably first of all inclined to accept it as the stronger of the two. For Baudelaire is on the whole quite clear about his belief that the artist must recoil from the temptations of languishing in nature. As well as coming out quite clearly in the "*Confiteor*", it is stated concisely in the section on eclecticism and doubt of the *Salon of 1846*: ". . . the first task of an artist is to substitute man for nature and to protest against her".⁹

That the artist must break off from the temptations to become absorbed in the initial shower of impressions falling down upon him from nature, that he has to stand aside and channel the ever-changing flux of sensations into a definite and definitive direction, that he has to pick his materials out of nature rather than accepting her at face value, follows also from the following passage: "Nature . . . is nothing but an incoherent mass of materials which the artist is called upon to associate and to put in order, it is an *incitamentum*, an awakening of the slumbering faculties!"¹⁰ In other words, natural reality being chaotic and incoherent, the emergence of art presupposes a distance from which the artist can wrestle from this mass a special possibility of creation. Similarly we read Baudelaire's comment: "The entire universe is merely a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination assigns a relative place and value".¹¹ Art is man's attempt to assert himself by forming the natural materials of his experience, by giving the manifold appearances a new order—or giving them an order for the first time—and by creating a unity from plurality. This may all seem evident enough, but these passages actually

contain the paradox that the artist breaks with the reality of nature only to return to it, and returns to it only to break from it. One is reminded here of what Camus said with respect to the artist's ambivalent position vis-à-vis reality: "The world is nothing and the world is everything, such is the double and unwearying scream of every true artist".¹² And that, consequently, the artist's experience of the world was "a perpetually renewed dissension".¹³

Granting for the present that some sort of break with nature and reality characterizes the process by which the work of art comes into being, what guarantees that this break actually resides in the completed and produced work of art? Could the break not confine itself to the mere method by which the artist gathers his materials, a method designed to be left behind by the result? Perhaps this question cannot be fully answered until the self-sufficiency of the work has been developed and clarified in the final section of this essay. However, one part of the "*Confiteor*" can serve to suggest the hypothesis that the break does in fact abide: "Ah! is it necessary to suffer eternally, or to flee the beautiful eternally?" The question seems to be rhetorical, implying alternatives of eternal suffering and eternal fleeing with respect to the beautiful. This seems to imply, in its own turn, that it makes no difference where beauty may be found, in nature or in art, the same dilemma is also found, the dilemma of either fleeing or suffering. In either case, a break seems to be concomitant to beauty. If this hypothesis be confirmed, namely that the finished work of art retains this character of a break with reality (when considered as art, of course, and not as merchandise for the art dealer or as amusement for the distraction of the bored public), then the work of art would in some sense include a destruction of the reality from which it broke away—at least to the extent that it also claims a status of its own. And Baudelaire does seem to hold that a destruction is implied by the creation of art: In the *Salon of 1859*, in the third chapter entitled "The Queen of Faculties", he describes the inadequacy of the copy theory of art in light of this queen of the faculties, the imagination; in sum the argument states that no factual, learned or passively received set of data from nature suffices in itself for the emergence of authentic art. The queen of faculties must be called into play: "The imagination touches upon all the others [faculties]; it excites them, it sends them into battle". He then goes on to describe the way in which she functions: "It decomposes all of creation, and with the materials gathered and arranged according to rules which originate only in the farthest depths of the soul, it creates a new world, it produces the sensation of the new. Since it created the world . . ., it is only just that it govern it".¹⁴ For our

purposes, it will be instructive to concentrate on the three statements: "It decomposes all of creation", and then: "it creates a new world", and finally: "it is only just that it govern it". *All* of nature is decomposed, deformed, or destroyed for the sake of a new world to be created, and the same principle of decomposition and creation should prevail in the finished product, just as it *does* as a matter of fact prevail in the process by which it was produced. It is clearly implied, if not explicitly stated, that the work of art not only disregards the original, that is, the ordinary order of things, but rules over all things (in so far as it is seen as a work of art, of course) and actually invalidates, that is, destroys in some sense that other order. It is interesting that Baudelaire does not keep up the symmetry of his previous statements, and that instead of saying the imagination *does* govern the world it created he says rather that it is *just* that it governs it, the implication being that there is an injustice in those instances where this rule does not prevail; perhaps the injustice lies in our lack of capacity to see it.

It is not obvious how Baudelaire actually incorporated his views on decomposition and sovereignty into his poetry. Perhaps he wanted to say only that the real work of art, whether it happens to be classical or modern, already displays these qualities by the very fact that it is art, and that they may be either covert or overt. In any event, we can see a certain subtle violation of our ordinary views of life and beauty by the mere title of Baudelaire's most prominent work: *The Flowers of Evil*. The poet wrote in one of the projected prefaces that the task of this work was ". . . to extract *beauty* from *Evil*".¹⁵ Here we have a proposal the mere possibility of which goes contrary to our normal pre-conceptions and expectations, not to speak of those ordinarily entertained at the time of Baudelaire. If the title had implied that the poems of the volume were the flowers or fruits of goodness, there would have been no tacit claim either to have destroyed the ordinary reality in which we are generally engrossed, nor to govern the realm out of which the poems were extracted. However, as it is, the title claims that the poems were derived from a source which is itself ordinarily discredited as a bona fide realm of beauty. We might then conclude that if these flowers do in fact reign, as the poet would have it, they owe no allegiance to the ordinary realm, but by contrast rule over that realm.

Returning now to Baudelaire's notion of the break with natural reality, the break peculiar to the emergence of the work of art, we may consider a third point prevalent in his theoretical writings. The break of art from natural reality not only implies and involves a *destruction* or decomposition of that

reality away from which the work of art breaks, but also a *self-sufficiency* of the reality which the work itself constructs. In a word, Baudelaire sees art as an end in itself, a kind of absolute. Poetry is sufficient unto itself. "Poetry must not under penalty of death or degradation, assimilate itself to science or morality; it does not have Truth as its end, it has only itself".¹⁶ In other words, as he says: "Poetry has nothing but itself as its end".¹⁷ Here we have one of the first concise and decisive formulations of the autonomy of the work of art, more specifically the work of poetry. Art and poetry were traditionally regarded as functioning variously in the communication of social norms or ideals, as embodying the essences of the human, the natural or the divine, or as expressing the dramatic view of life as it is experienced by the soul of a sensitive poet. Nobody would deny that such functions can and have been discerned, but Baudelaire maintains that the essence and real meaning of art and poetry is missed by any view which focuses its attention upon one or more of them. This is the theoretical point which is made over and over again in the modern trend of art and poetry since Baudelaire, sometimes to the point of absurdity as in the case of much pop art. But even though we may see a correlation between Baudelaire's theory and modern practice, it still remains to be seen whether Baudelaire actually embodied his principles in his own poetry. In order to approach this question, we shall first examine once again the "*Confiteor*" and then analyze the misleading temptation to construe his poetry in general to be an expression of his own life and personality.

The last "verse" or sentence of the "*Confiteor*" suggests something both about the status of art and the situation of the artist: "The study of the beautiful is a duel where the artist screams in terror before being vanquished". Why does the poem speak of the *study* of the beautiful when we might expect to hear something about the *creation* of the beautiful? The implications of the respective alternatives are divergent. For *studying* the beautiful implies that the object of study, whether it be nature or art, somehow exists independently of the man or the men concerned with it. In this case the autonomy of beauty and art is preserved. But the other alternative, that of *creating* the beautiful, raises the question and ambiguity as to whether the work of art is not entirely dependent upon the creator, and whether it cannot be properly explained by referring to the personality of the artist. We do speak loosely of the artist as originating or creating his work, but Baudelaire seems to suggest that this is misleading. This suggestion is bolstered by the remainder of the sentence: the artist is vanquished. On the face of it, this seems to tell us something of the plight of the artist and therefore to reduce the work of art to the situation

of the artist, thereby disclaiming art as an absolute. But this interpretation would only hold up if art *contained* this plight of the artist. As a matter of fact, this poem claims that the beautiful, or the work of art, *results* in the plight of the artist. Far from containing the personality of the would-be creator, art rejects him and says nothing more about him than that he is so rejected. With this rejection in view, it would seem strange to maintain that Baudelaire's conception of art was such that the work would be destined to give form to his own peculiar "state of mind". His critics have, however, done an exhaustive job of showing Baudelaire's similarities with the Romantic poets on this point, basing their arguments on the fact that the artist is still considered in this oblique way to figure in the work, and also on the fact that Baudelaire himself said he still suffered from the stigma of Romanticism. Nonetheless, it is our task here to speak about that which distinguishes Baudelaire and enables him to re-form the Romantic heritage into a thought and poetry which was powerful enough to engender modern and contemporary trends in these subjects. This leads to the second point, that of the poet's apparent leanings toward Romanticism.

If Baudelaire wanted *The Flowers of Evil* to be seen as a poetry of personal confessions or a diary of his private states of being, he did not make his desire explicit; he did not date his poems in the fashion in which Victor Hugo did, nor does the reader find any overt references to personages and events in his own life. In fact, he wrote in a letter to Calonne (in November, 1858) that he purposely avoided introducing such references: after speaking of some attempts that had been made to interpret his poetry in a religious vein, thereby detracting from their autonomy, he writes: "Only those endowed with an absolute bad faith will fail to understand the intentional impersonality of my poetry".¹⁸ Even though most of the poems of *The Flowers of Evil* do in fact speak in the "I" form, the form by itself does not justify any judgment personalizing the poetry. After all, this form is a technique of narration, and it is the entire narration as such that constitutes the work of poetry in its autonomy. Baudelaire conceives of this narration as a function of what he calls the imagination, and *not* as a function of either the heart or the rational powers of man. That is, poetry cannot be reduced to either subjective or objective elements outside the work itself: "Thus the principle of poetry is, strictly and simply, the human aspiration toward a superior Beauty, and the manifestation of this principle lies in an enthusiasm . . . [which] is completely independent of passion, or the intoxication of the heart, and independent of truth, or the fodder of reason".¹⁹ In the same essay he then goes on to say: "The sensitivity of

the heart can even be harmful in this case. The sensitivity of the imagination is of a different nature; it knows how to choose, how to judge, how to compare, how to flee this, how to search out that, rapidly, spontaneously".²⁰ The point of these passages seems to be that the narration of a poem may be characterized by enthusiasm and imagination, but in a way which allows it to stand in its own right, apart from distractions from either the side of the poet or that of any supposed reality external to the narration. In accordance with this enigmatic transcendence, Baudelaire concludes by ascribing a paradoxical motto to the poet: "My function is extra-human".²¹

Both as an artist or poet *and* as an aesthete, Baudelaire made considerable contribution to the course and understanding of art, but we must nevertheless admit that in his work the tendencies and trends of modern art and aesthetics are still embryonic in form. More than that, of course, it is evident that much of what he has to say remains couched in traditional terms. But as Rimbaud had predicted, "other horrible workers will come; they will begin at the horizons where he succumbed"!²² Examples of these "horrible workers" are easy enough to recall; we only have to think of Valéry and his belief that poetry, breaking away from the usual view of existence, was "a perfectly constructed fragment of an inexistent edifice".²³ And then we can think of Surrealism and how it rightly deduced the name and aim of its movement from Baudelaire's "surnaturalism".

Other poets immediately succeeding Baudelaire on the Olympic heights of poetry implemented the element of destruction into their work in such obvious ways that they hardly need to be explicated. Mallarmé's obscure poetry, for instance, frustrates rational attempts to correlate his verses with any ordinary aspects of experience. Mallarmé's view of the language of poetry carries Baudelaire's hesitant remarks to their logical conclusion: The poetic phrase no longer names the presence of things, but destroys them while relying on a presentation of their absence: "What good is the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its virtual vibratory disappearance according to the play of words—if it isn't so that the pure notion will emanate from it without the impediment of an approximate or concrete recollection?"²⁴

Rimbaud, to pick one last example from the poets who brought these ideas into further concretion and who spoke of Baudelaire as "the first visionary, King of poets, a real God",²⁵—Rimbaud offers testimony in *The Illuminations* that poetry can free itself from any and all external shackles, and stand in front of us as a pure absolute paying no homage to any other power but itself. The depersonalization which had started with Baudelaire emerges here

in its purest form. For most of the poems in *The Illuminations* have no "I" at all and hardly any reference to reality as we ordinarily conceive of it with our ordinary concepts of order and meaning. In those poems where we do find an "I" it would be hard to maintain that the author himself was meant. Moreover, Rimbaud refutes any such attempt in his letter to Izambard, where he writes: "It is wrong to say: I think. One should say: I am thought. I is another".²⁶ And in a letter to Demeny where he wrote on the same topic, illustrating his point with several metaphors, thus making it nearly impossible to mistake it: "I is another. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it isn't to blame. I witness the exfoliation of my thought, I look at it, I listen to it, I give a stroke of the bow: the symphony begins to stir in the depths or comes bursting onto the scene".²⁷

In conclusion, it might be stated then that Baudelaire's approach to poetry and art, the approach involving a break with and a destruction of ordinary reality, leads in the direction of a conception of all art as an absolute and gives it an independent status. Here in Baudelaire's theoretical and poetic writings, we find indeed one of the first movements to create an art concentrating on its own essence and drawn towards itself. This is the birth of the remarkable phenomenon of modern art, where neither the artist, nor the "states of mind" of the artist, nor the values upon which our world is erected, stand in the foreground. It is an art dedicated to an absolute, to which neither natural forms, nor the interests of man, nor formal aesthetic worries can give a name; this absolute is art itself.

NOTES

The following abbreviations are used: R.O.C.: Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Edition de la Pléiade (Paris, 1963);

M.O.C.: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes*,
Edition de la Pléiade (Paris,
1961);

B.O.C., Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Edition de la Pléiade (Paris, 1961).

1. B.O.C., p. 232.
2. B.O.C., p. 1215.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris, 1947), p. 119.
4. *Baudelaire*, a collection of critical essays, ed. Henri Peyre (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), p. 167.
5. B.O.C., p. 706.
6. B.O.C., p. 705.
7. B.O.C., p. 885.
8. B.O.C., p. 877.

9. *B.O.C.*, p. 930.
10. *B.O.C.*, p. 1124.
11. *B.O.C.*, p. 1044.
12. Albert Camus, *Discours de Suède* (Paris, 1958), p. 56.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
14. *B.O.C.*, pp. 1037-38.
15. *B.O.C.*, p. 185.
16. *B.O.C.*, p. 685
17. *Ibid.*
18. Charles Baudelaire *Correspondance Générale*, Tome II (Paris, 1917), p. 233.
19. *B.O.C.*, p. 686.
20. *B.O.C.*, p. 688.
21. *B.O.C.*, p. 700.
22. *R.O.C.*, p. 271.
23. Paul Valéry, *Variété V* (Paris, 1945), p. 113.
24. *M.O.C.*, p. 857.
25. *R.O.C.*, p. 273.
26. *R.O.C.*, p. 268.
27. *R.O.C.*, p. 270.